

# A Paragraph

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2007: “I GOT A HAMMER FOR YOU,” said Dad, at the bottom of the stairs. He started hacking into the wall before I joined him, eschewing any ceremony to mark the beginning of renovations. Dad wore rubber flip-flops and flower-print shorts. During the summer, he only put on a shirt when he went to work or to coach us at soccer. His chest hair wasn’t grey yet. ¶ I mimicked his stance, his swing into the plaster, his scrunched face as white dust burst out. ¶ “Wanna pop?” he asked, after we worked a while. ¶ “Yup.” ¶ He went to the garage. I admired the large holes he made compared to my small, hesitant ones. On the wall beside the doorframe I noticed pencil marks I used to measure my height when I was smaller. I had forgotten they were there. ¶ “You almost tore through that,” I said after he came back down the steps. ¶ “What?” ¶ “Where I put my height.” ¶ “You wanna keep it?” ¶ “Duh,” I snarled. ¶ He cut out the section of wall with a skill saw. ¶ 2014: The piece of dry wall now rests under my bed. The pencil slowly fades. I marked my height not only for the temporary thrill of seeing how tall I grew; I did it for some purpose I couldn’t understand as a child. Dates beside the ticks disappear after a certain height. I can’t tell how tall I was off the floor because Dad only cut out the piece of wall with pencil marks. ¶ Seven years later, renovations still aren’t complete. My room is on the top floor. There are papers, posters, and a large map tacked to the walls. Books lounge in a haphazard heap. At the moment, the carpets are being replaced on the landing so I only have a slim path of yellow foam to walk on to get to the bathroom or downstairs. Power tools lie scattered; a circular saw bares its steel teeth. Contractors work while I’m at school. ¶ Our suburban bungalow is being transformed into a fortress. My parents are extending rooms beyond conceivable purpose; they’ll have to buy more cars to fill garage space. ¶ When friends come over, Dad holds a can of beer in his hand as he mimes and explains what everything will look like. He doesn’t try to conceal his proud smile when cross-armed men in golf shirts look up to the high ceiling from the bottom floor, gape and flash the black insides of their nostrils in a moment of pure incredulity. Dad waits for their gaze to shift back to his eye level and says, “Yup. Remember when we lived in that duplex?” ¶ 2005: “I’ll tell you when I need you,” Dad said to me. ¶ We stamped our boots on the mat and went into my grandmother’s living room. ¶ “How are you, Mom?” said Dad. ¶ “Good, how are you?” Dad went into her junk room. White paper spilled everywhere as if the soul of an avalanche had abandoned its body the moment we opened the door. I filled a bowl full of pretzels in her kitchen and sat on the couch beside her. She stared at me. ¶ “How are you?” I said. ¶ “Good, how are you?” ¶ “Do you want some pretzels?” I said. ¶ “No, they’re for you.” ¶ It was winter. Black branches stretched everywhere like someone had been shaking a pen to get it to write while ink splayed out behind them. She picked a string off her sweatshirt and kept it in a clenched

fist. ¶ “Let me get you some pretzels,” she said, heaving herself off the couch and into the kitchen. I said nothing. ¶ “Come to the junk room; I need you,” called Dad. ¶ I passed by the kitchen. Grandma was hunched over an old birthday card like the brown cane she kept in a closet. Her kitchen was also extremely cluttered. ¶ In the junk room, Dad was stuffing armfuls of paper into black bags. The paper was all scrawled on with a frantic hand. ¶ “Hold the bag open for me,” he said and dumped in paper. He tied the bag and left mud prints as he trundled through layers of paper on the floor. I did nothing. “Hurry up or we’ll be here ‘til July,” he said. We carried the bags out into the van. “We’ll be back,” Dad told grandma. She was on the couch, staring out the window. She didn’t hear. ¶ In the van, the backseats were crowded with bags. Dad let me drive out to the junkyard. I was twelve. The enormous garbage pile belched smoke into the sky. We threw the black bags onto the smoldering pile. I drove back home. ¶ Much later, grandma’s paragraph-long obituary in the newspaper said she wrote poetry throughout her life. ¶ 2014: The constant replacing of old objects for new erases the physical material from which we experience and understand our lives. At our present rate, this attitude will be almost certainly be passed on to future generations. The ’10s and ’20s replace ’70s and ’80s, which will be replaced by ’50s and ’60s, which will be replaced by ’00s. We have initiated a cycle in which the structures and objects that presently define our lives will be eradicated as we age. As we lose the objects and spaces in which we’ve lived, all that we’ll have left to remember our past life will be fading memories. ¶ Some work their entire lives to live in a home they have been dreaming about every day for decades as they process forms and scan applications in a sweaty, doleful office. After their home is built, they’ll sell it for the best price and new families will renovate away all traces of the previous owners. In the coming years, new home owners will receive my parents’ mail once or twice. They’ll chastise their children for touching a stranger’s mail. ¶ Unless fame gives you a reason to be in the consciousness of future generations, an individual’s time on this earth is about 150 years from the moment of being conceived in a parent’s mind to fading in a grandchild’s memory. In due time, I will lose all memory of my grandmother because I am genetically destined to deteriorate with Alzheimer’s, for my jaw to hang open beneath the skin of my sagging face and be pulled toward a fat belly by threads of drool. I am destined to stare silently out the window. ¶ I write to root my feet in the sand during the tidal wave. I want to stay where I am for just a little longer than everybody else. I want to leave a body of work to show someone I existed, how I thought, what I accomplished with the beautiful gift of life I have received while my culture’s objects and attitudes have been long forgotten, recovered then dismissed as primitive. I write so that when I die I’ll live on as more than a paragraph. 🐾